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The Thread of Legislation

It all happened in answer to a question!

The question: "What did we hope to accomplish?"

"For one thing, we would urge shoe manufacturers to make good-looking shoes for business wear, without high heels." This was the pronouncement at the organizational meeting of the Iowa Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs meeting in Des Moines on May 31, 1919.

Thus we began to lobby. It was a far cry from the ideals of today. Even though the women were frustrated, defeated in some attempts, they were successful in others. A golden thread of consistent, dynamic, and persistent legislative action is woven into the fifty-year history of the Club.

At the 1920 Convention a lively discussion and battle developed on the idea of nine-hour working days for women. Statistics were quoted proving women should have economic rights as well as political rights. At this convention a telegram was sent urging Iowa Congressman Burton E. Sweet to use his influence in obtaining consideration and passage of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity Bill.

At the Davenport convention delegates resolved

"that this body go on record as opposing special laws affecting the hours and wages of women which do not affect the hours and wages of men." The National Federation at this time urged, "Stand on your own feet and fight." Members of the Iowa Federation were lauded for their opposition to eight-hour day legislation which came before the 40th General Assembly. Legislative action by the National Federation brought the following endorsements: The Child Labor Amendment, the World Court, Federal Department of Education, Uniform Marriage and Divorce Bill, and the Vocational Education Act.

Following the "golden thread," legislative action was taken in 1926 on an amendment proposed for the Constitution of Iowa making women eligible to hold seats in the General Assembly. In this same year the Iowa Federation further reaffirmed its position of being opposed to matters of legislation and public policy which were discriminatory to women as to position, salary, and laws. A firm stand was made against discrimination based upon sex, insisting that aptitude, training, and efficiency should be the qualifications by which business and professional women would be measured. Later in the '20's, the BPW asserted that women should participate in politics to the end that they might aid in the election to public office of men and women who would further those principles upon which good government is based.

The Iowa Federation began to keep a watchful eye on legislation in the General Assembly affecting women. Adoption of a measure supporting aid to dependent children, premarital examinations, and other innovations, gave evidence of the active interest of women in new fields, not only in Iowa but the nation.

It was gratifying, in 1940, to have a member of the Iowa BPW (Virginia Bedell, Spirit Lake) appointed as the first woman to serve on the State Board of Parole. Later women were to serve in the General Assembly.

Then came the war! Iowa women were urged to continue support of the Equal Rights Amendment, to endorse the new school code, to take a more active interest in club members affiliating with the political party of their choice, and to show a more vigorous promotion of qualified women to public office. In 1946 the BPW Legislation Committee, following considerable study, brought to the attention of the convention the fact that discrimination against the employment of more mature women, without regard to mental and physical competence, deprived the country of the work potential of trained and experienced people. A recommendation was made that the Federation be given the responsibility of devising ways of educating the public to correct this situation.

During the silver anniversary year, the Iowa BPW legislative effort continued with success in

the area of probation policies and state adoption laws. Major emphasis was placed on a request for investigation of state institutions under the Board of Control and the Governor of Iowa was urged to appoint more women to state committees.

In the decade of the '60's the record showed consistency in working for legislation covering men and women, without discrimination and favoritism. A uniform retirement age for men and women was supported, as was pay for comparable work, and the same requirements for each under Civil Service.

Through the efforts of the Iowa Legislation Committees, the National Federation now supported this endorsement: "...implementing within the framework of the Constitution, policies that promote peace and strengthen this country, make the United Nations more effective, improve the Mutual Security programs and endorse essential Foreign Aid, Military and Mutual Trade agreements."

As a further result of intensive study and legislative effort a Governor's Status of Women Committee was named, and women became members of the Employment Practices Committee.

Iowa business and professional women have worked successfully for school reorganization, four-year terms for county officers, equitable legislative reapportionment of the General Assembly, area technical and vocational schools, regional

jails to house men and women, revision of divorce laws and child labor laws, equalization of salaries for men and women in education and the professions and, above all, support to local law enforcement officials and environmental concern.

Constantly the legislative thread has been woven into the fabric of these "golden years." The strong leadership of district and club Legislation Chairmen has responded to the needs facing the Federation. Truly it has been said that to leave footprints on the sands of time, one must wear work shoes.

This all began with shoes—and a question!

HELEN VANDERBURG